

## Mental Health in Cancer Care

When people think about cancer care, they often associate it with diagnosis, treatment plans, hospital visits, and the long process of physical recovery. These are the visible and structured parts of care, the ones most often discussed in clinical settings. Yet alongside these, another experience unfolds more quietly. It is the experience of living with uncertainty, fear, emotional strain, and the gradual shifts in how a person understands themselves while going through treatment.

Even before treatment begins, the emotional journey has already started. The process of getting tests done, biopsies, scans, PET imaging, and then waiting for results can feel exhausting. Each step brings its own emotional and psychological burden. The waiting period often brings anxiety that is difficult to explain, where the mind moves between hope and fear. When a diagnosis is finally confirmed, many people describe it as a moment where everything changes at once. Plans pause, certainty disappears, and the future suddenly feels unclear.

In that moment, there is often no time to sit with what has happened. One appointment leads to another. Treatment decisions need to be made. Families step in, routines shift, and life moves quickly in a different direction. Some people talk about what they are feeling, while others become quiet, holding their thoughts within. Cancer is not a single event. It is a series of emotional and physical experiences that unfold over time, often without pause.

Research across oncology and psycho-oncology shows that emotional distress is common during cancer care. The *ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines* highlight that a significant proportion of patients experience clinically meaningful distress during treatment. Studies from different regions reflect similar patterns of anxiety and depression during diagnosis and treatment.

These emotional experiences shape how people move through care. When mental health is not addressed, it directly affects treatment understanding, decision-making, and patient engagement. Mental health is not separate from cancer treatment. It is part of it.

### Recognizing Distress and Strengthening Support Pathways

Research consistently shows that healthcare systems have made important progress in recognizing psychological distress during cancer treatment. Studies by *Shalata (2018)* and *Shafi (2020)* demonstrate that anxiety, depression, and emotional strain are present across different stages of illness. Screening tools and clinical guidelines now help identify patients who may need support.

This is a meaningful step forward. It shows that systems are paying attention to emotional well-being.

The opportunity now lies in strengthening what happens next.

When distress is identified, patients should move smoothly into support pathways that include counselling, psycho-oncology services, and consistent follow-up. Studies by *Banipal (2015)* and work by *Latif (2020)* on digital screening approaches show that systems already have the tools to identify distress early and efficiently. This creates a strong foundation to build on.

In many settings, however, support pathways are still developing. Patients may be screened, but access to timely mental health care can vary. Connecting screening directly with structured support can make this process more meaningful. When care teams respond to distress as part of routine treatment, mental health support becomes a natural part of the care journey rather than an additional step.

### **The Timing Gap in Mental Health Support**

Evidence shows that emotional distress often begins at the point of diagnosis. The study by *Mona Ali Hassan* highlights that patients experience anxiety and depression even before treatment starts. This is a time when individuals are processing complex information and facing uncertainty about what lies ahead.

At the same time, support is often introduced later in the treatment journey. Research by *Ginger and colleagues* indicates that referrals to psycho-oncology services frequently happen after distress becomes more visible or severe.

This creates a gap in timing.

Early mental health support can make a meaningful difference. When care teams introduce counselling and emotional support from the beginning, patients are better prepared to cope with treatment. Early support helps patients process information, manage fear, and stay engaged with care. It also allows healthcare providers to understand patient concerns more clearly and respond in a timely way.

### **Emotional Impact of Cancer Treatment**

Cancer treatment places physical and emotional demands on patients at the same time. The study by *Pandey* shows that patients undergoing chemotherapy experience significant levels of anxiety and depression. Patients experience side effects, face uncertainty about outcomes, and make repeated hospital visits, all of which shape their emotional experience.

These challenges continue throughout treatment. Studies by *Shafi and Shalata* show that psychological distress does not remain limited to diagnosis. It evolves with the treatment process.

Research by *Alwhaibi* demonstrates that anxiety and depression reduce quality of life, affecting how patients experience daily living during treatment. *Więckiewicz* shows that untreated mental health conditions can affect treatment adherence and increase the overall burden on healthcare systems.

Patients do not just receive treatment. They live through it every day.

Recognizing this allows care teams to respond more effectively. Regular emotional check-ins, access to counsellors, and integrated support within treatment settings can help patients manage this experience more steadily.

### **Differences in Patient Mental Health Needs**

Mental health experiences during cancer are not the same for everyone. Research by *Zeilinger and colleagues* shows that anxiety and depression vary across cancer types. This means that different diagnoses can bring different emotional challenges.

The systematic review by *Chen Ee Low* on rare cancers highlights that patients with less common conditions often face additional uncertainty and limited access to information, which can increase emotional strain. At the same time, *Deodhar and colleagues* show that older adults experience psychological conditions differently, and healthcare systems often recognize these later.

Age, type of cancer, stage of illness, and social context all shape how patients experience mental health challenges.

This highlights the importance of flexible and responsive care. While general screening is important, support systems should also adapt to individual needs. Recognizing these differences allows care to become more patient-centered and more effective.

### **Gaps Between Evidence and Practice**

Across research and practice, one reality becomes clear. We understand a lot about mental health during cancer, but we are still learning how to support it consistently in real life.

We know that distress is common. We know it affects outcomes. But support does not always reach patients in a consistent and connected way.

In many settings, screening, referral, treatment, and follow-up do not always connect smoothly. Patients may be identified as needing support, but the next steps are not always clear or accessible.

There are also differences in access across regions. In countries like India, psycho-oncology services are still evolving, and access to trained professionals remains limited in many settings. At the same time, researchers still study some patient groups less, including older adults and those with rare cancers. These factors can make it more difficult to identify and respond to psychological needs early.

These gaps are not only about resources. They are also about how different parts of care connect and work together.

## **Strengthening Mental Health in Cancer Care Systems**

Healthcare and policy systems can strengthen mental health support during cancer treatment by taking clear and practical steps. Routine distress screening should be part of standard care, and care teams should directly connect it with counselling and follow-up support.

Hospitals and cancer centers can integrate psycho-oncology services into multidisciplinary teams so that mental health support becomes part of everyday care. This allows doctors, nurses, and counsellors to work together and respond to patient needs more effectively.

Expanding training opportunities for professionals who can provide psychological support can help strengthen care, especially in settings where access to specialists is limited. Digital tools, as explored by *Rana and Latif*, can support screening processes and extend access in resource-constrained settings.

Healthcare systems should also track mental health as part of quality care. When they include mental health indicators in their evaluations, they ensure that this aspect of care is consistently addressed. At the same time, research should continue to study how these interventions work in real-world settings so that policies remain practical and effective.

## **Ethical and Human Considerations in Care**

Cancer affects more than the body. It changes how people see themselves, how they relate to others, and how they think about the future.

When mental health needs are not fully addressed, patients may end up carrying much of that burden on their own. This affects their dignity, their confidence, and their ability to stay engaged with treatment.

Access to mental health support is also an issue of equity. Not all patients have the same access to counselling or emotional care. Addressing this gap is part of creating fair and inclusive healthcare systems.

Supporting mental health means recognizing the full experience of illness. It reflects an understanding that treatment is not only about managing disease but also about supporting people through one of the most difficult experiences of their lives.

In practice, some organizations are already working towards making this kind of care more accessible and integrated into everyday treatment

## **Sanjeevani: Supporting Mental Health Through Cancer Care**

Within the broader understanding of mental health in cancer care, the work of Sanjeevani...Life Beyond Cancer offers a grounded and human example of how emotional support can become part of everyday care. Founded in 2012 by cancer survivor Ruby Ahluwalia, the organization has worked towards creating spaces where patients feel supported in what they experience emotionally through the journey.

Sanjeevani's approach reflects an important understanding. Alongside medical treatment, patients also go through fear, uncertainty, and emotional shifts that are not always easy to express. Recognizing this, their work brings mental and emotional support together in a more connected way. Through initiatives such as the National Conference on Integrative Cancer Care, they create spaces where doctors, caregivers, survivors, and practitioners come together to explore how care can respond not only to medical needs but also to the emotional and everyday realities people experience during cancer. These conversations help strengthen the place of mental health within cancer care and encourage a more integrated and patient-centered approach.

This approach does not move away from medical treatment. It builds around it. Treatments like chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation remain central, while practices such as yoga, breathwork, nutrition, and counselling help patients cope with the experience of treatment in a more balanced way. These practices support emotional well-being, reduce anxiety, and allow patients to feel more involved in their own care, which becomes especially important during a time that often feels uncertain.

One of the ways this comes into practice is through the Srjan program. Designed as a structured support and recovery program, Srjan brings together nutrition, mental health support, and body-based practices in a way that patients can engage with over time. Instead of one-time sessions, patients participate in multiple interactions where they learn, reflect, and gradually build the ability to manage both physical and emotional challenges. This ongoing support helps patients better understand their experiences and respond with more clarity. The outcomes reflect this approach. Patients have reported improvements in anxiety, sleep, fatigue, and overall emotional well-being. When patients receive consistent and guided support, they find it easier to go through treatment and feel more at ease in their day-to-day lives.

Sanjeevani's work extends further into life after treatment through its holistic healing initiative, Satori. Recovery continues even after treatment ends. Many cancer victors continue to experience physical side effects, emotional strain, and an ongoing fear of recurrence. Satori responds to this phase by creating a space where individuals can gradually rebuild their sense of well-being, both physically and emotionally.

Satori is designed as a structured workshop that supports cancer victors in addressing both physical and mental health challenges after treatment. Through a series of guided sessions, participants engage with practices that focus on nutrition, breathing, and mental resilience. These sessions help individuals manage stress, improve physical strength, and develop a more balanced way of responding to their experiences. The program also emphasizes the role of immunity and encourages participants to take an active role in their own well-being.

The impact of Satori reflects the importance of this approach. Assessments have shown improvements in physical, cognitive, and social functioning, along with better emotional regulation and a stronger sense of control over health. Many participants say they feel more confident and more able to manage their lives after treatment. Over time, Satori has reached 55,000 cancer victors, helping them rebuild their strength, emotional well-being, and sense

of direction. It shows how mental health support, when combined with practical tools, can help people move beyond survival and towards a more meaningful recovery.

Alongside these structured programs, Sanjeevani also provides in-hospital counselling support for patients and their families. These interactions often happen in the middle of treatment, when patients are navigating complex emotions and decisions. Having someone present to listen without judgment and offer guidance creates a sense of comfort and reassurance. Families and caregivers also receive support, which is important because they carry emotional responsibilities that are not always visible. These conversations help both patients and caregivers feel more prepared and supported as they move through treatment together.

Sanjeevani also brings these ideas into larger platforms through initiatives such as the State Conference on Integrative Cancer Care (SCICC). Held in Chandigarh and Jaipur, these conferences brought together healthcare professionals, experts, caregivers, and cancer survivors to explore how care can become more holistic and responsive to patients' needs. Through sessions on nutrition, stress management, sound healing, movement-based therapies, and emotional well-being, these gatherings created space for both learning and reflection. Conversations around patient experiences, communication, and integrative care further strengthened the understanding that mental health plays an important role in the cancer journey.

What makes these efforts meaningful is the way they bring different parts of care together. Clinical treatment, emotional support, patient education, and community engagement come together in a way that reflects how people actually experience cancer. Support is not limited to a single moment. It continues across diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, allowing individuals to access the care they need at different stages.

Across all these initiatives, Sanjeevani continues to build sustained and evolving support systems that accompany patients throughout the cancer journey.

Sanjeevani's work shows that mental health support can be integrated into cancer care in a practical and accessible way. By combining medical treatment with emotional care, counselling, and community-based support, they create an environment where patients feel heard, supported, and better able to move through their journey with clarity and strength.

## **Conclusion**

Mental health support during cancer treatment is essential. It shapes how patients understand, respond to, and continue treatment. At the same time, support systems are still evolving, and many patients do not yet receive consistent psychological care.

Moving forward requires a clear shift. Care teams need to start mental health support early, continue it throughout treatment, and make sure both patients and their families can access it easily.

Cancer care should include trained counsellors who regularly engage with patients, listen without judgment, and create a safe space for them to express what they are going through.

These conversations help patients process fear, stay motivated, and feel supported as they navigate treatment. Families and caregivers also need support. Caregiver burnout is real, and counselling can help caregivers manage their roles with more clarity and emotional strength.

When mental health support becomes part of everyday cancer care, patients do not have to carry the emotional burden alone. They move through treatment with greater clarity, stronger support, and a deeper sense that they are being cared for not only as patients, but as people.

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